

Community involvement brings variety to Williston arts activities

By Andrea Winkjer Collin



Light streams from the stained glass creations in the windows of the James Memorial Center for Visual Arts in Williston.

Every town has its architectural landmarks. Four grand buildings in downtown Williston are the Elks Lodge, the old Post Office, the James Memorial Library and the old Armory. The Elks Lodge retains its original function and the Post Office is now an office building. The other two have been given new purposes as centers for Williston's arts activities.

The library is now the James Memorial Center for Visual Arts, and the Old Armory is the home of community and youth theater performances. Their new functions point to the determination of residents to both preserve Williston's history and keep their town a strong arts community.

It was 20 years ago that the 1911 library building lost its purpose when a new library opened on the western edge of town. A group of concerned citizens sought a new purpose for the building to prevent its demolition. After considering several options, the group decided it should be a place for the community to exhibit art. For the past 10 years, the building has been the home to exhibits from the North Dakota Art Gallery Association, other local and regional artists, as well as high school art shows, the local Prairie Painters, Williston Area Woodworkers and the Upper Missouri Camera Club.

Mary Olson, manager of the

center, says the charm of the building has been retained, including its many stained glass windows. Renovations that have been made to the building include improving heating and insulation, remodeling a kitchen, adding handicapped accessibility, and installing hanging strips for artwork. A storage area is currently being built to hold a permanent collection of artwork that was given to the center from Dr. Rex Wiederanders and his late wife, Carole, who for many years operated a gallery of fine art in Williston.

Community members who have supported the new purpose for the library include art teacher Clif Sundt, who is president of the James Memorial Preservation Society board of directors.

"Every community needs art appreciation," he says. "Since Williston is somewhat remote and isolated from larger metropolitan areas, it's nice to have this center to give the community an opportunity to observe and appreciate good art."

Anna Hoffman is a Williston potter who teaches youth art



The James Memorial Center has frequent exhibits from both local and regional artists.



Seasonal events are held throughout the year at the James Memorial Center.

classes and sits on the center's board. "We make the arts available to this community in ways no other entity can, and there is a deep sense of appreciation for the nostalgia and historic import of the building itself. It is wonderful to hear stories and remembrances come tumbling out at any event we host. Knowing our community values that history, understanding our responsibility to preserve that heritage, makes the work we do here that much more rewarding."

Artist and arts volunteer Ardis Jacobson appreciates the center for the community atmosphere it provides. "Being an artist can be a lonely existence, but here we work side by side, each in our field of expertise, promoting, preserving and enhancing this already beautiful building for the betterment of the Williston community. If one can love a building, I love this one!"

Two blocks to the east, across to the other side of Main Street, is where B. Michael Quale oversees the theatre productions of adults, youth and area high school drama groups in the Old Armory. He is the only paid employee of both Entertainment, Inc! and Youth Education on Stage (YES), which for the past 20-plus years have attracted some 75 to 100 participants in each of their productions.

As an adult community theater, Entertainment Inc! presents five productions a year. "We've done a lot of musicals and comedies, and some Shakespeare and we try to appeal to different types of audiences," Quale says. "We just finished 'The Miracle Worker,' which was our biggest undertaking so far."

Finding enough volunteers to produce each show is not a problem, Quale says. "We try to have an open door here and welcome new people to the community," he says.

YES presents three shows each summer – mostly musical theatre and large cast productions – for children in grades one through 12. Quale says students spend about three weeks getting a production together. "It is an education for them to be part of a production from start to finish," he says.

With its many renovations, The Old Armory, which was built in 1915, is also the site of high school regional theater competitions and other productions. In addition, Quale provides technical resources, including costumes and lighting to regional high schools, churches and arts groups for their productions.

Relatively new to the community is the Upper Missouri Arts Council, which was organized in 1999 to be a clearinghouse for events in Williams, McKenzie and Divide counties. It publishes a directory of arts and culture in the region, as well as an annual arts calendar. It hosts the Prairie Arts Festival every June and this year began a "Starry Night in January" open house for the public to learn more about the area's arts organizations.

Band music and a classical concerts series have long been mainstays of the Williston community. For 73 years, an annual Band Day parade has brought a national guest band to march with regional bands each May. And, since 1945, the



The James Memorial Library building in Williston has a new function as the community's center for the arts.



Local artists appreciate having a place to create and display their work.

Williston Concert Program, formerly known as the Community Concert Series, brings four concerts by professional musicians to the area.

Another significant arts event is the Rough Rider International Art Show and Auction, which for 23 years has featured regional artists to this three-day show every Mother's Day weekend. Sustained by a loyal corps of area volunteers, it has been named one of the top 25 shows in the United States by U.S. Art Magazine.

As Williston looks to the future with its arts programs, Quale says it is with an attitude of greater cooperation. "Now more than ever, regionalism is coming into play here. There seems to be a greater sense of community among groups throughout the area."

The James Memorial Center for the Visual Arts, Entertainment, Inc! Youth Education on Stage and the Upper Missouri Arts Council receive funding from the North Dakota Council on the Arts. For more information about the North Dakota Council on the Arts and its programs that support community arts across the state, call 701-328-7590, or visit its website at www.discovernd.com/arts.